

# *Documents on Diplomacy: The Source*

## *The Threat from Japan* *Theodore Roosevelt to Senator Knox, Undated, 1907*

**M**y Dear Senator Knox:  
You are soon to become Secretary of State under Mr. Taft. At the outset both he and you will be overwhelmed with every kind of work; but there is one matter of foreign policy of such great and permanent importance that I wish to lay it before the President-to-be and yourself. I speak of the relations of the United States and Japan.

It is utterly impossible to foretell as regards either foreign or domestic policy what particular questions may appear as at the moment of most engrossing interest. It may be that there will be no ripple of trouble between Japan and the United States during your term of service. It may very well be that you will have acute trouble about Cuba, or with Venezuela or in Central America, or with some European power; but it is not likely that grave international complications—that is, complications which can possibly lead to serious war—can come from any such troubles. If we have to interfere again in Cuba, or take possession of the island, it will be exasperating, and we may in consequence have to repeat our Philippine experiences by putting down an annoying but unimportant guerrilla outbreak. But this would represent merely annoyance. The same would be true of anything in Central America or Venezuela.

I do not believe that Germany has any designs that would bring her in conflict with the Monroe Doctrine. The last seven years have tended steadily toward a better understanding of Germany on our part, and a more thorough understanding on the part of Germany that she must not expect colonial expansion in South America. As for England, I cannot imagine serious trouble with her. The settlement of the Alaskan boundary removed the one grave danger. The treaties now before the Senate are excellent, and all we have to fear is some annoying, but hardly grave, friction in the event of the failure of the Senate to ratify them.

But with Japan the case is different. She is a most formidable military power. Her people have peculiar fighting capacity. They are very proud, very warlike, very sensitive, and are influenced by two contradictory feelings; namely, a great self-confidence, both ferocious and conceited, due to their victory over the mighty

empire of Russia; and a great touchiness because they would like to be considered as on a full equality with, as one of the brotherhood of, Occidental nations, and have been bitterly humiliated to find that even their allies, the English, and their friends, the Americans, won't admit them to association and citizenship, as they admit the least advanced or most decadent European peoples. Moreover, Japan's population is increasing rapidly and demands an outlet; and the Japanese laborers, small farmers, and petty traders would, if permitted, flock by the hundred thousand into the United States, Canada, and Australia.

Now for our side. The events of the last three years have forced me to the clear understanding that our people will not permit the Japanese to come in large numbers among them; will not accept them as citizens; will not tolerate their presence as large bodies of permanent settlers. This is just as true in Australia and Colombia as in our Rocky Mountain and Pacific states; but at present the problem is more acute with us because the desire of the Japanese to come here has grown. The opposition to the presence of the Japanese, I have reluctantly come to feel, is entirely warranted, and not only must be, but ought to be, heeded by the national government in the interest of our people and our civilization; and this in spite of the fact that many of the manifestations of the opposition are unwise and improper to the highest degree.

To permit the Japanese to come in large numbers into this country would be to cause a race problem and invite and insure a race contest. It is necessary to keep them out. But it is almost equally necessary that we should both show all possible courtesy and consideration in carrying out this necessarily disagreeable policy of exclusion, and that we should be thoroughly armed, so as to prevent the Japanese from feeling safe in attacking us. Unfortunately, great masses of our people show a foolish indifference to arming, and at the same time a foolish willingness to be offensive to the Japanese.

Labor unions pass violent resolutions against the Japanese and almost at the same moment protest against strengthening our military resources on land or sea. Big corporations seek to

introduce Japanese coolies, so as to get cheap labor, and thereby invite agitation which they are powerless to quell. The peace societies, and senators and congressmen like Burton of Ohio, Perkins of California, Perkins of New York, Tawney of Minnesota, McCall of Massachusetts, and Bartholdt of Missouri blatantly or furtively oppose the Navy and hamper its up-building, while doing nothing whatever to prevent insult to Japan. The California legislature is threatening to pass the most offensive kind of legislation aimed at the Japanese, and yet it reelects a wretched creature like Perkins to the Senate although he has opposed, with his usual feeble timidity and so far as he dared, the up-building of the Navy, following Hale's lead.

We are therefore faced by the fact that our people will not tolerate, and ought not to tolerate, the presence among them of large bodies of Japanese; and that so long as they are here in large bodies there is always chance either of violence on the part of mobs or of indiscreet and improper action by the legislative bodies of the Western states under demagogic influence. Furthermore, in Hawaii the Japanese already many times outnumber the whites, and have shown on more than one recent occasion a spirit both truculent and insolent.

In Hawaii the trouble is primarily due to the shortsighted greed of the sugar planters and of the great employers generally, who showed themselves incapable of thinking of the future of their children and anxious only to make fortunes from estates tilled by coolie labor. Accordingly, they imported, masses of Chinese laborers and, then masses of Japanese laborers. Throughout my term as President, I have so far as possible conducted our policy against this desire of the sugar planters, against the theory of turning Hawaii into an island of coolie-tilled plantations, and in favor of making it so far as possible the abode of small settlers.

With this purpose, I have done everything I could to encourage the immigration of southern Europeans to the islands, and have endeavored so far as I could in the absence of legislation to restrict the entrance of Asiatic coolies. So far as possible our aim should be to diminish the number of Japanese in the islands without any regard to the fortunes of the sugar planters, and to bring in Europeans, no matter of what ancestry, in order that the islands may be filled with a white population of our general civilization and culture.

As regards the mainland, our policy should have three sides and should be shaped, not to meet the exigencies of this year or next but to meet what may occur for the next few decades. Japan is poor and is therefore reluctant to go to war. Moreover, Japan is vitally interested in China and on the Asiatic mainland and her wiser statesmen will, if possible, prevent her getting entangled in a war with us, because whatever its result it would hamper and possibly ruin Japan when she came to deal again with affairs in China. But with so proud and sensitive a people neither lack of money nor possible future complications will prevent a war if once they get sufficiently hurt and angry; and there is always danger of a mob outbreak there just as there is danger of a mob outbreak here.

Our task therefore is on the one hand to meet the demands which our own people make and which cannot permanently be resisted, and on the other to treat Japan so courteously that she will not be offended more than is necessary; and at the same time to prepare our fleet in such shape that she will feel very cautious about attacking us. Disturbances like those going on at present are certain to occur unless the Japanese immigration, so far as it is an immigration for settlement, stops. For the last six months under our agreement with Japan it has been stopped to the extent that more Japanese have left the country than have come into it. But the Japanese should be made clearly to understand that this process must continue and if there is relaxation it will be impossible to prevent our people from enacting drastic exclusion laws; and that in such case all of us would favor such drastic legislation.

Hand in hand with insistence on the stopping of Japanese immigration should go insistence as regards our own people that they be courteous and considerate, that they treat the Japanese who are here well; and above all that they go on with the building of the Navy, keep it at the highest point of efficiency, securing not merely battleships but an ample supply of colliers and other auxiliary vessels of every kind. Much of the necessary expense would be met by closing the useless Navy yards. By the way, the fighting Navy should not be divided; it should be kept either in the Pacific or in the Atlantic, merely a squadron being left in the other ocean, and this in such shape that, in the event of war, it could avoid attack and at once join the main body of fighting ships.

All this is so obvious that it ought not to be necessary to dwell upon it. But our people are shortsighted and have short memories—I suppose all peoples are shortsighted and have short memories.

The minute we arrange matters so that for the moment everything is smooth and pleasant, the more foolish peace societies, led by men like ex-Secretary of State Foster and ex-Secretary of the Navy Long, clamor for a stoppage in the building up of the Navy. On the other hand, at the very moment when we are actually keeping out the Japanese and reducing the number of Japanese here, demagogues and agitators like those who have recently appeared in the California and Nevada legislatures work for the passage of laws which are humiliating and irritating to the Japanese and yet of no avail so far as keeping out immigrants is concerned; for this can be done effectively only by the national government.

The defenselessness of the coast, the fact that we have no army to hold or reconquer the Philippines and Hawaii, the fact that we have not enough battleships nor enough auxiliaries in the Navy—all these facts are ignored and forgotten. On the other hand, the Japanese, if we do not keep pressure upon them, will let up in their effort to control the emigration from Japan to this country; and they must be continually reminded that unless they themselves stop it, in the end this country is certain to stop it, and ought to stop it, no matter what the consequences may be.

There is no more important continuing feature of our foreign policy than this in reference to our dealing with Japan; the whole question of our dealings with the Orient is certain to grow in

importance. I do not believe that there will be war, but there is always the chance that war will come; and if it did come, the calamity would be very great. And while I believe we would win, there is at least a chance of disaster. We should therefore do everything in our power to guard against the possibility of war by preventing the occurrence of conditions which would invite war and by keeping our Navy so strong that war may not come or that we may be successful if it does come.

Sincerely yours,

THEODORE ROOSEVELT

[Handwritten] P. S. I enclose a copy of my telegram to the speaker of the California Lower House; this was really meant almost as much for Japan as for California, and sets forth, seemingly as incidental, what our future policy must be.

[Handwritten] If possible, the Japanese should be shown, what is the truth, that our keeping them out means not that they are inferior to us—in some ways they are superior—but that they are different; so different that, whatever the future may hold, at present the two races ought not to come together in masses. ■

*Source*

Vincent Ferraro Home Page at Mt. Holyoke College: Source: *Papers of Theodore Roosevelt*, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, pp. 120-126

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